

Social Media and Women's Empowerment: A Case Study of the Semi-Urban Community in Bang Sai, Ayutthaya

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Abstract

This study examines how social media contributes to women's empowerment in the semi-urban community of Bang Sai District, Ayutthaya, where women face the dual pressures of industrial employment and traditional household responsibilities. A qualitative approach was employed using Kabeer's empowerment framework resources, agency, and achievements as the principal analytical lens, complemented by digital feminism, intersectionality, and uses and gratifications theory. The analysis focuses on how women use digital platforms to access knowledge, create economic opportunities, negotiate family roles, and reconstruct their social identities within a rapidly changing semi-urban context.

The findings reveal that social media promotes women's empowerment in three interrelated dimensions. First, digital platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube function as learning resources that enhance vocational knowledge, digital skills, and access to economic opportunities. Second, these platforms strengthen women's agency by enabling online entrepreneurship, greater control over income and time, and stronger bargaining power within households. Third, empowerment outcomes extend beyond economic gains to include increased self-esteem, social recognition, decision-making capacity, and the transformation of women from relatively voiceless workers into active agents of social change. The study proposes the Digital-Led Life Transformation Model, which explains empowerment as a transition from structural constraints, through strategic use of digital tools and digital bargaining power, toward dignity, autonomy, greater equality, and community leadership.

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Introduction

In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, semi-urban areas have become fascinating landscapes of high complexity. They act as a transitional space where the growth of cities meets and overlaps with traditional rural life. This economic shift doesn't mean the old ways of living disappear instantly; instead, it creates an overlapping space. It's a place where you can see rural traditions and modern urban lifestyles existing side by side. While this provides people with better access to jobs and infrastructure, it also brings tough structural challenges - like a higher cost of living and rapidly changing social expectations that people must adapt to almost overnight (Yenbumrung & Pongsawat, 2019). The main principle of this study is that even though the economy changes, old social rules still control much of people's lives.

This change is clearly seen in Bang Sai, Ayutthaya. Bang Sai is a great example of a 'semi-urban' area with high economic value. Located near major industrial estates like Rojana and Hi-Tech, it has become a key manufacturing base. With over 2,500 factories in Ayutthaya, Bang Sai itself hosts many plants focused on food processing and electronics (Department of Industrial Works, 2024). This has directly changed the local way of life. This large number of factories has reshaped how people live, especially for women, who now make up 60-70% of the workforce. Today, the landscape of Bang Sai shows factories standing right in the middle of farming communities. Even though life now revolves around factory shifts, the people still keep their identity through side jobs like handicrafts and food processing. These traditional skills have now become a strong foundation for them to enter the digital economy (Social Security Office, 2024)

In this changing world, women in Bang Sai play a key role. They have many duties. Besides working in factories making electronics or food, they must return home to cook, clean, and care for their families. This means they work 'double duty' - balancing a full-time job with unpaid housework. Even though having a job brings more income, these women still face hidden obstacles and social limitations that make it difficult for them to grow in their careers. They also deal with job insecurity and a lack of support systems, like reliable childcare. Also, they have

family debt and don't know much about managing money. This makes it hard for them to start their own business. Therefore, empowerment for these women is not just about money. Therefore, empowerment for these women is not just about money. However, a major problem is that although these women help the economy, they are still stuck in traditional roles that limit their power to make decisions. This article wants to answer one question: How can social media help these women manage their dual roles and gain real power for themselves?

Most importantly, in this digital age, social media has become an alternative space that is changing the game. It's a tool that allows women to break through physical limits and the heavy burdens of their dual lives (Ahmad, et al., 2023; Priya & Thaiyalnayaki, 2024). It helps them build a new identity and drives empowerment in a way that is sustainable and perfectly fits their semi-urban lifestyle (Dwityas, et al., 2025). To better understand these complex changes, the following section will introduce the theoretical frameworks used to analyze how power and identity shift in this digital landscape. By moving from the lived experiences in Bang Sai to a theoretical perspective, we can see more clearly how technology helps women negotiate their roles in a changing society.

Content

1. Theoretical Framework

In this study, I have integrated key theoretical frameworks to analyze the shifts in power dynamics among women in Bang Sai district. The framework is divided into two main dimensions: social development and the practical process of empowerment.

1) Digital Feminism and Intersectionality

To understand the role of women today, we must look through the lens of Feminism, which acts as a compass for explaining women's rights and power across different eras. This has evolved from early movements for legal rights to the current fourth-wave feminism, which embraces diverse identities and digital technology. In this era, digital tools and social media are more than just communication channels; they have become a powerful third space (Kositpipat, 2019). This online world allows women in Bang Sai to break free from physical limitations and traditional norms, enabling them to build their own identities and socio-economic networks independently. However, to provide a deeper analysis, I

use Intersectionality as a primary lens. Women in Bang Sai do not face just one type of challenge; instead, they deal with overlapping conditions that create layered vulnerabilities. The details were explained below:

Age and the digital divide: younger women may use social media fluently for empowerment, while older women might become more vulnerable due to a lack of tech skills and access to new opportunities.

Economic status and occupation: being both factory workers and informal workers (like vendors or farmers) means they have limited time and resources. Social media has become a vital tool for reducing financial risks and building new wealth.

Family status and caregiving burdens: being the primary caregiver at home is a major factor that shapes their online opportunities. This often leads to double duty, where women must manage digital tasks alongside unpaid household chores and family responsibilities.

2) Kabeer's Empowerment Framework

To visualize the actual process of empowerment, this research follows Kabeer's framework (Kabeer,1999,2016). She defines empowerment as the process by which women, who were previously denied the power to make choices, regain the right and power to define their own life paths. This happens through three main components:

Resources: this isn't just about income but also includes digital resources and the confidence to use technology. The intellectual capital and social connections built online help women stay open to new information.

Agency: this is the heart of empowerment. It is the ability to set goals and make decisions - such as starting new online activities or negotiating with family members to share household chores. This allows them to reclaim power over their time from the rigid industrial systems that once controlled their lives

Achievements: these are qualitative outcomes that go beyond money. It includes self-esteem, earning respect from the community, and having a significantly greater say in household decisions

Synthesis of Framework By integrating these theories, we can conclude that women's empowerment in Bang Sai district via social media is a phenomenon where they use digital resources as a tool to drive their agency. This allows them to overcome the obstacles created by their overlapping social challenges. This process

doesn't just lead to more income; it transforms everyday power relations, enabling them to define success for themselves within their developing semi-urban society.

2 . Digital Empowerment: A Comparative Analysis through Kabeer's Framework

To provide a clear picture of the empowerment dynamics among women in Bang Sai district, this research applies Naila Kabeer's three core elements. By comparing these local experiences with global phenomena, we can better understand the similarities and unique characteristics of women's power in the digital age.

1) Resources: shifting from economic capital to digital intellect

In traditional frameworks, resources are often narrowly defined as financial capital or land ownership. However, in the modern era, digital resources emerged as a significant game - changer. Global research in Africa and South Asia has shown that internet access allows women - who were previously confined to their homes - to reach knowledge and resources that are unavailable in their local communities (Buvinic, et al., 2020). For the women in Bang Sai district, resources do not just mean having a smartphone or an internet signal; they include the knowledge and digital skills gained through learning on social media. Using platforms like TikTok or Facebook to practice new skills creates a pattern similar to findings in India and Brunei (Priya & Thaiyalnayaki, 2024). In these contexts, social media acts as a virtual classroom that breaks down the walls of knowledge for women in semi-urban areas. This allows them to have valuable assets that is on par with people living in major cities.

2) Agency: Decision-making and global bargaining

The heart of empowerment is agency, which refers to the ability to make decisions and define one's own goals in life. On a global scale, there are fascinating comparative studies in countries like Egypt and India (Singh & Singh, 2024; Mishra, 2021). These studies found that when women start earning income through social media, their decision-making power regarding household budgets increases significantly - whether it is about their children's education or investing in assets.

Looking back at Bang Sai district, this power is reflected in how women reclaim their freedom of decision-making amidst a daily schedule that is strictly controlled by the industrial factory system. Women in Bang Sai use social media to create a second career choice, which leads to intra-household bargaining. This is

much like research in Indonesia, which indicates that having an online space gives women the courage to reject traditional roles and demand the right to manage their own time. This is a deep empowerment process that transforms them from followers into direction-setters (Dwityas, et al., 2025).

3) Achievements: Redefining value and pride

When we talk about achievements, researchers now look at more than just money. They focus on quality of life and how people actually feel. In parts of China and Malaysia, success isn't only about high sales. It also means being respected by neighbors and finally having a voice in society (Ahmad, et al., 2023; Li, et al., 2023). In the context of Bang Sai district, the achievements seen are very similar to these international trends. Income is just the first door that leads to self-esteem and confidence in one's own potential. When women in Bang Sai can manage their own professional groups or build a strong online presence, they change their status from being voiceless labor to being influential voices in the community. This represents a structural success that is far more sustainable than just material wealth alone.

While these international trends help us understand empowerment broadly, we must look closer at how it actually works in Bang Sai. The next section explores how social media acts as a special tool for these women to rebuild their identities and reclaim their power in their daily lives (Boruah, 2024).

3. Social Media and Women's Empowerment in Bang Sai District

1) Social Media as a Space for Participation and Identity Reconstruction

In the context of a semi-urban area like Bang Sai district, social media does not function merely as a general communication tool. Instead, it has evolved into a vital digital social space that plays a crucial role in shifting the structure of power relations. This digital realm provides opportunities for participation that break through physical boundaries (Singh & Singh, 2024; Priya & Thaiyalnayaki, 2024). For the women of Bang Sai district, these digital platforms act as a third space situated between the rigid world of industrial factories and their traditional domestic homes. It enables them to transition from their conventional roles as housewives or voiceless laborers into becoming online entrepreneurs or opinion leaders in their communities. This identity reconstruction in the virtual world does more than just

generate extra income; it significantly reduces the feelings of isolation and accumulated stress caused by the demanding labor in the industrial system, which often diminishes their sense of self on a daily basis.

2) The Dynamics of Media Selection: Uses and Gratifications Perspective

The intense use of social media by women in Bang Sai district can be deeply explained through the uses and gratifications theory. This theory suggests that media users are active in selecting platforms that best meet their specific needs (Katz, et al., 1974). Their usage can be categorized into three main dimensions.

Cognitive dimension and human capital: women in Bang Sai district treat social media as a knowledge source. They use platforms like YouTube to learn new skills, such as food processing, handicrafts, or online business management. This is an enhancement of their human capital that transcends the limits of time and location. It allows them to gain expertise without having to resign from their full-time factory jobs to attend training courses in the city.

Relationship dimension and digital social capital: building a peer support system through Facebook Groups and Line is essential for dealing with social and economic pressures. Being able to communicate with colleagues in the same professional groups or with customers creates a sense of belonging to a wider social network beyond their immediate local community.

Release and internal power dimension: Platforms like TikTok have become key spaces for creative expression, breaking down the traditional norms that once suppressed them. This transforms into confidence in one's own potential, which leads to better long-term mental health.

3) Integrating Empowerment into Global Standards

When analyzed through Kabeer's Empowerment Framework, there are significant structural changes in three core elements within Bang Sai district:

Resources: from physical assets to digital capital.

Social media acts as a resource multiplier. It turns a single smartphone into a storefront, a warehouse, and a classroom. This lowers the barriers for women with limited capital, allowing them to start their own economic activities on equal footing. This aligns with international research finding that digital access is the key to reducing gender inequality (Sadri & Flammia, 2010).

Agency: proactive decision-making

Women in Bang Sai district express their agency by initiating businesses and managing their own lives that were once strictly controlled by the factory system. This state is a reclaiming of time, a high-level form of power negotiation that allows them to define their own life paths more clearly (Kabeer, 2016)

Achievements: redefining value

Success here is not just about money but includes intra-household bargaining power (Kabeer, 2016a). As women in Bang Sai district generate income and become digitally literate, they gain more respect and consideration from family members. This leads to household relationships that are more equal and sustainable than ever before (Dwityas, et al., 2025; Zou, et al., 2024).

4. Literature Review and Research Gap

1) Thai Social Context and Structural Limitations for Women

From the literature review, it is found that the status of Thai women today is still largely framed by patriarchy, which exerts influence through tradition and conventional values. This results in women facing complex structural issues, such as informal debt, family insecurity, and limited access to equal resources (Naowasaisri, 2013). Although the government has tried to implement policies to improve women's quality of life, such as the Women's Development Fund, these policies often only respond to short-term problem-solving. They have yet to address strategic - the fundamental shifts in power required to achieve structural equality with men. However, research by Wongsethian (2006) confirms that Thai women possess high self-management potential for survival. They are capable of using media spaces or social processes to negotiate power and expose the injustices they encounter in their daily lives.

2) Global Dynamics of Digital Platforms and Women's Empowerment

At the international level, digital platforms have become vital tools for driving rights and economic participation. Research by Ahmad, et al. (2023) in Brunei and Malaysia indicates that social media helped women bypass traditional barriers to education and business, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. This aligns with a quantitative study in India by Priya and Thaiyalnayaki (2024), which found a very high positive correlation between social media usage and women's empowerment ($r=0.957$). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube enable women to

develop personal brands and overcome traditional gender barriers (Singh & Singh, 2024). Furthermore, in Indonesia, Dwityas, et al. (2025) found that these media are significant channels for accessing health information and digital entrepreneurship for urban women.

3) Critical Analysis: Challenges and Digital Backlash

Despite positive findings, in-depth studies point to the complexity and dark side of technology. Li, et al. (2023) introduced the concept of superficial empowerment through a case study of rural women in China. They found that while platform algorithms might help generate temporary income, they can also reinforce traditional social expectations and gender roles. Additionally, Yao, et al. (2024) discovered concerning results in Congo, where exposure to certain media might actually reduce women's decision-making power over their own income if proper oversight is lacking. This leads to suggestions that true empowerment must shift from viewing women as vulnerable groups toward creating horizontal partnerships and gender-sensitive social innovations to achieve structural sustainability (Zou, et al., 2024; Aamir, et al., 2024).

4) Research Synthesis and Literature Comparison Table

To understand the connection between previous studies, the researcher has synthesized the data into a comparison table to highlight similarities and differences:

Source (Year)	Study Area	Key Empowerment Issues / Findings
Ahmad, et al. (2023)	Malaysia / Brunei	Access to education and entrepreneurship during COVID-19.
Singh & Singh (2024)	India	Personal Branding development through IG and FB.
Priya & Thaiyalnayaki (2024)	India	High positive correlation between social media and empowerment (r=0.957).
Dwityas, et al. (2025)	Indonesia	Access to health information and civic participation.
Li, et al. (2023)	China	Income increase via Live Streaming (Superficial Empowerment).
Zou, et al. (2024)	China / Tourism	Shifting from vulnerable groups to empowered local partners.
Aamir, et al. (2024)	SMEs	Sustainable efficiency through digital innovation.
This Study	Bang Sai District	Empowerment in a Semi-urban landscape near industrial zones.

Table 1 Comparison of Previous Studies on Women's Empowerment

From the table, it is clear that most research focuses on economic dimensions in foreign contexts but lacks an analysis of power dynamics in Thailand's semi-urban areas.

Based on the review and synthesis above, the researcher has identified significant gaps that remain understudied. *In the first about contextual gap*, most studies focus on women in either major urban centers or remote rural areas, leaving a gap in the study of semi-urban areas like Bang Sai district, which are highly dynamic due to their proximity to industrial zones. *In the second about theoretical gap*, there is a lack of systematic application of Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework to the digital dimension - specifically linking digital resources to strategic agency and achievements (true independence) under the pressures of a semi-factory, semi-agricultural society. In the third about methodological gap, most existing works are quantitative, focusing on income figures. There is a lack of qualitative research that reflects the actual voices and experiences of women in Bang Sai district. This research aims to fill these gaps to create a new understanding of how social media transforms the lives of women in Thai society.

5. Women's Power in Bang Sai: Dynamics & Redefinition

1) The Paradox of Transitional Spaces and the Double Burden

In the semi-urban setting of Bang Sai district, women inevitably face a double burden, balancing their roles as industrial laborers with traditional domestic responsibilities (Department of Industrial Works, 2024; Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Provincial Commercial Office, 2024). However, social media serves as more than just an economic tool; it functions as a reclaimed space for self-identity (Boruah, 2024). Access to digital platforms provides these women with a private virtual sanctuary to unwind and access information that shifts their perspectives (Ahmad, et al., 2023). Even as they encounter a second shift in the form of managing digital tasks such as coordinating family matters through chat groups, handling online transactions, or sourcing household supplies - these digital tools empower them to manage their time and relationships more flexibly. Ultimately, this leads to increased bargaining power within the family to share domestic chores, marking the beginning of a significant shift in micro-level power dynamics. (Dwityas, et al., 2025)

2) Power Negotiation and Overcoming Digital Patriarchy

Empowerment through social media in the context of Bang Sai district is a process where women use technology to transcend gender limitations previously

set by traditional society. While some academic circles point out superficial empowerment - suggesting women might be exploited by algorithms for commercial gain - the reality in Bang Sai district shows that the true power emerging is agency. This power extends far beyond just earning extra income. Social media serves as a safe space that builds self-efficacy, giving women the courage to express opinions and question the old power structures in their families, which were often dominated by patriarchal ideas that limited women to household care (Ashcraft, 2013). This new power is clearly reflected in two ways:

Firstly, it is creating household bargaining power via the digital economy. When women in Bang Sai district manage income from online sales and use it for their children's education or essential expenses, it is not just an economic increase (Priya & Thaiyalnayaki, 2024; Singh & Singh, 2024). It is a shift from being dependent to becoming a co-decision maker (Suksawat, 2022). This income, independent of the factory system, helps build intra-household bargaining power, earning them significantly more respect and acceptance from the head of the family.

Secondly, it is mental healing and creating private online spaces. Under the pressure of the double burden from the factory system (Department of Industrial Works, 2024; Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Provincial Commercial Office, 2024), using platforms like TikTok to communicate stress is not just for entertainment (Mishra, 2021). It is about creating a digital private space to heal from the strict rules of the industrial system. Gaining likes, acceptance, or a sense of self from the outside world reduces their old image as voiceless labor and transforms them into individuals with the power to manage their lives and emotions (Li, et al., 2023; Yao, et al., 2024).

Therefore, overcoming patriarchy in the digital world for the women of Bang Sai district is not a violent ideological battle. Instead, it is the use of online spaces to gradually adjust the balance of power in daily life, leading to more equality and human dignity.

3) From Followers to Digital Social Change Agents

This article proposes that women's empowerment in Bang Sai District should be seen as building a strategic partnership in every dimension, not just economically. Social media has changed the status of women from vulnerable beneficiaries to social change agents who can communicate and build support networks (Aamir, et al., 2024; Boruah, 2024; Zou, et al., 2024). Government policies

should not just focus on vocational skills but must promote strategic needs, such as rights awareness, equality, and digital leadership. This will allow women to use technology as a foundation to elevate their status and decision-making power in all areas of life sustainably.

Conclusion

This study shows that social media is a special third space that helps women in semi-urban areas break through old social limits. By using Kabeer's framework, we see a Digital-led Life Transformation Model. In this model, social media is not just for selling things; it is a tool that helps women gain the power to manage both their housework and their factory jobs better.

Real empowerment here is about more than just making money. While income is good, the real success is that women gain more respect and more power to negotiate in their lives. Even though they still have a double burden (working in factories and at home), social media gives them a place to find their new identity and make their own choices. This study shows that empowerment in Thailand is not simple; it depends on technology, family support, and fair work conditions.

To support women's empowerment in semi-urban areas, this study suggests the following:

Policy level: The government should provide support like local childcare centers. This gives women more time to use digital tools to improve their lives, instead of just teaching them internet skills.

Social Level: Families must share housework. True equality happens when husbands and family members help, so women do not have to carry a heavy workload both at home and at work alone.

Future research: Studies should look into digital labor and stress. We must ensure that being online makes life easier for women, not more exhausting.

New Knowledge

The findings of this study are synthesized into the digital-led life transformation model as illustrated in Figure 1. The model explains the transition through three key stages.

1. Old Constraints

The journey begins by identifying the structural barriers faced by semi-urban women. These include factory hierarchies and heavy domestic demands, which trap them in the status of voiceless laborers. In this stage, women lack authority, have no time for themselves, and are often invisible within the industrial and household power structures.

2. Strategic Digital Tools

Social media platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Facebook) act as the primary catalyst for change. These tools provide a digital third space, a sanctuary where women can escape daily pressures to reclaim their identity. Through these platforms, women develop digital bargaining power, which is essential for reshaping dynamics and negotiating their roles in both private and public spheres.

3. New Knowledge Contribution

The final stage of this model represents the study's core outcome: a qualitative life transformation. This contribution is defined by women gaining dignity and choice to shape their own lives beyond financial success. Digital proficiency further fosters genuine equality, allowing for a fairer balance of power in both home and work. Ultimately, women evolve from voiceless laborers into social change agents valued leaders who bridge knowledge gaps and drive meaningful progress within their communities.

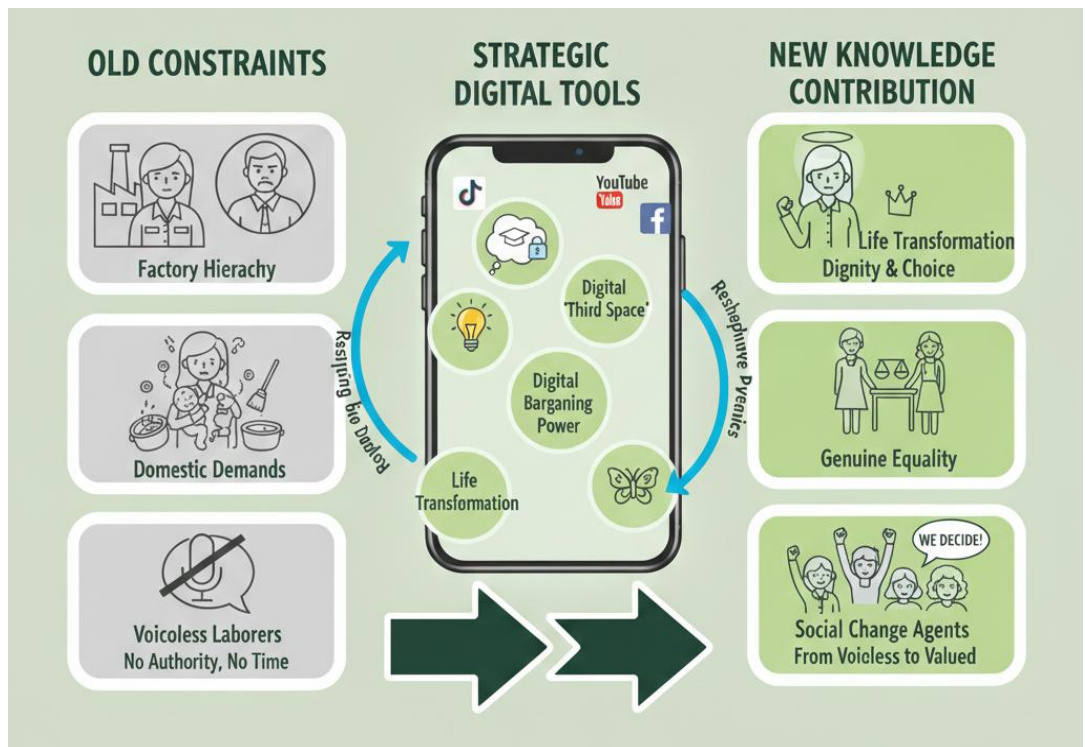


Figure 1 The digital-led life transformation model

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